

We must recognize . . . that representative democracy has failed, both politically and juridically as well as socially . . . As a consequence, we must return to the fundamental meaning of “democracy,” the power of the demos to govern itself. Just as the dictatorship of the proletariat rapidly became the dictatorship over the proletariat, so modern democracy quickly became a power exercised over the demos.

[I]n reality the people have no power. They neither make the laws nor govern.

—Jacques Ellul (1992)

[T]he re-creation of meaning [of democracy] depends on a political community’s ability to recall its past, how it came to be confused about democracy, and its own standing *vis-à-vis* democracy. Only then will our political community remember what it means to conduct itself democratically.

—Russell L. Hanson (1989)

## Introduction

*Democracy as the Political Empowerment of the People: The Betrayal of an Ideal* is being published concurrently with its companion volume *Democracy as the Political Empowerment of the Citizen: Direct-Deliberative e-Democracy*.

The present volume argues that the conception of democracy that prevails in the general consciousness of the contemporary world is a distorted version of the “original” idea of democracy. Democracy originally meant “rule by the people.” An important component of democracy in its original formulation was the ideal of the citizens’ *direct* participation in the legislative and political decision-making process. The modern representative governments lay claim to being democratic, yet completely disregard this fundamental component of the idea. In the prevailing intellectual and political climate, the absence of the ideal of direct popular participation is often justified in terms of the presumed impracticality of the original idea in the complex conditions of the modern nation-state. The present volume goes against the current. To begin with, it argues that there exist ample historical evidence and compelling reasons for making the case that the absence of this ideal in the theory and practice of representative democracies results, in part, from conscious efforts that aim at discrediting the ideal; that there exist (and have existed in the past) powerful intellectual and political-economic forces which fully devote themselves to making sure that the original sense of the idea of democracy appears as impractical, even dangerous, and thus ensuring that it does not receive a fair hearing in the court of the public political opinion. To this end, the present volume offers a short conceptual history of the idea of democracy. The aim here is to provide an account of the efforts and the relevant historical and theoretical developments that have contributed to the “perversion” of the original idea of democracy.<sup>1</sup> This presentation is not a mere attempt at telling a sad story, but rather an endeavor to present a critical examination of the hitherto-existing theories and regimes of democracy. The ultimate aim of this examination is to retrieve the original idea, and thus help prepare the political-theoretical grounds for reviving the ideal of the citizens’ direct participation in making the policies and laws that shape their lives. (The latter task

takes up the space of the companion volume, which will be referred to from this point on as *Direct-Deliberative e-Democracy*.)

Toward this end, the present volume argues that the notion that ordinary citizens should have *direct* and substantive roles in making legislative and policy decisions is not only a deep-seated idea in the Western tradition of political thought, but also constitutes the main ideal (and a primary moral component of the idea) of democracy. Unfortunately, this ideal (and its moral substance) has been sabotaged repeatedly, as the idea of democracy has been subjected to perversion after perversion throughout its long history. The present volume further argues that, with its system of political representation, the “liberal-democratic conception of democracy” represents the latest version of these perversions.

The companion volume, on the other hand, begins where the present volume leaves off. It starts with arguing that the latest electronic technologies and media have provided the impetus for revisiting the original idea of democracy and retrieving the value inherent in the idea of the citizens’ *direct* participation in politics. It also argues that these technologies and media make it possible to reformulate the idea of direct democracy in ways that would make it a workable option, and worthy of serious consideration as an alternative approach to the question of democracy in today’s large nation-states. *Direct-Deliberative e-Democracy* revives and reclaims for the idea of democracy what the present volume retrieves. That is, it formulates a new theory of democracy (a theory of *e*-democracy indeed) that integrates the ideals of the citizens’ direct, deliberative, and equal participation in politics into the political-cultural fabrics and institutional arrangements of present-day American liberal-democracy.

In preparing the stage for its companion volume, the present volume sets out to accomplish three goals. The first is to present an overview of the history of the perversion of the idea of democracy in the pre-twentieth-century era and, at the same time, to bring to light some of the factors that contributed to this perversion. The second goal of the present volume is to rescue the ideal of the citizens’ direct participation present in the original idea from the perversions and deformations it has suffered at the hands of liberal democracy in the twentieth century. Finally, the third goal is to examine the reasons why some of the most recent theoretical attempts at retrieving the moral content of the original idea have failed. All in all, these three goals are geared toward accomplishing a major task in this volume, namely, to return to, and retrieve the original sense of the idea of democracy (and to recover the full scope of its ideals) as the idea of the *direct*, deliberative, and equal participation of all citizens in the political process, and thus lay the grounds for restoring to democracy the full scope of its ideals.

Two factors motivated the return to the original idea. The first is the desire to counter the ongoing fanfare of triumphalism—and a campaign of deception, one should add—that celebrates the existing American model of democracy as democracy *par excellence* and holds it up to the world, especially to the developing countries, as a model to emulate. The problem with the prevailing understanding of democracy, in particular in its American manifestation, is that it stands in a symbiotic relation to free-markets. Nowadays, the terms “democracy” and “free mar-

kets” appear so often together that the coupling instills in the popular consciousness of the world the false notion that democracy and free-markets are conceptually inseparable and internally connected, and that they “go together,” and both can be reduced to the common category of freedom of choice. The United States sees its mission in the world as expanding “democracy and free-markets.”<sup>2</sup> The fanfare of American triumphalism and the celebration of the victory of “democracy and free-markets” over totalitarianism in the post-Cold-War era is so loud and ubiquitous that one hardly gets to hear the view that *democracy is a moral idea, and that it essentially and conceptually has nothing to do with free-markets*. The recent popular literature, and the scholarship on democracy, by and large seem to have been mesmerized by this fanfare and succumbed to its deceptive message. Works on democracy that challenge the prevailing conception of democracy nowadays are hard to find. Democracy no longer appears as an “essentially contested concept” as it seemed a few decades earlier.<sup>3</sup> The free-market worshipers and their intellectual entourage seem to have finally won the contest. They have succeeded in gutting the moral substance of democracy and beating whatever is left of it into a set of anormative “rules” and a “free method” that guide the expansion of free-markets and cast an aura of legitimacy on the political universe of the market-driven societies. This is not a recent development, but rather a consummation of a massive political-intellectual undertaking that began over a century ago. By returning to the original idea of democracy, and retrieving its “true” meaning, this book intends to contribute to the undoing of this deception.

The second motivating factor for returning to the original idea of democracy is the conviction that, after twenty five hundred years, the political-moral ideals that served as the pillars of the original idea in ancient Athens still retain their appeal.<sup>4</sup> That is to say, they continue to command the respect of the moderns. And for this reason, these ideals can be used as a foundation for formulating a new conception of direct, deliberative, and “egalitarian” democracy that would be compatible with the realities of the contemporary world and, at the same time, could be buttressed by broader political-moral convictions and moral arguments that appeal to its citizens. This conviction also constitutes the point of departure of the companion volume and ties, as was noted above, with its claim that the latest *e*-technologies provide us with new tools to work toward realizing the old ideals in ways that the ancients themselves could not realize.<sup>5</sup>

In terms of architectonics, the present volume is divided into three parts. The first two parts are greatly indebted to the late C. B. Macpherson’s *Real World of Democracy* and the *Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*, and follow in the tracks of the path laid by these works, albeit not in a straightforward way. Part I begins with a discussion concerning the original meaning of democracy as the idea of rule by the people, as it flourished in the golden age of ancient Athens, and then goes on to compare this idea with the muddled and distorted version of it that pervades the political consciousness of the contemporary world. This version reduces democracy to a mere “method”—and a “free” one at that—for selecting the political leaders. Part I then sets out to trace the history of the perversion and betrayal of the idea of democracy in the period that spanned from the Athenian world up to the

arrival on the scene of the idea of representative democracy in the nineteenth century. This overview closely follows in the footsteps of C. B. Macpherson. It is argued in Part I that starting with the fall of Athenian democracy from glory, the meaning of the word democracy as the “rule by the (entire) people” or “power to the people” gradually degenerated to “rule only by the common people or the poor.” On the one hand, this degeneration took place consciously under the aegis of the rich in an attempt to denigrate the idea of democracy. On the other hand, democracy came to represent the struggle and the reaction of the common people and the poor against the oppressive rule of the aristocrats and the rich. Moreover, it is argued that the idea of democracy in this long period was coupled with a thick notion of equality. This coupling of sovereignty and equality, it is argued, persisted through Rousseau and was finally undone in the liberal West in the nineteenth century, thus giving way to the notions of “representative democracy” and “liberal democracy.” Furthermore, it is argued in this part that this de-coupling of sovereignty and equality went unheeded in the non-liberal East, and, on the strength of Marxist thought, the coupling received a new reformulation and was transformed into a new political ideal that found its highest expression in Bolshevism and the Russian Revolution of 1917. Finally, in the closing pages of Part I, it is argued that the entire range of ideals and views that came to be associated with the idea of democracy in the pre-liberal and non-liberal societies can be conceptualized as *the ideal of the political empowerment of the people*.

In continuing to trace the history of the degeneration of the idea of democracy, Part II presents a critical examination of the transformations the idea underwent in the liberal and liberal-democratic societies. It is argued here that, starting with the nineteenth century, the idea of democracy in the West first had to succumb to, and then share, the political center stage with a new and powerful political theory that appeared on the horizon in the seventeenth century. This new theory was none other than liberalism. Part II begins with a brief overview of how liberalism rose to political prominence and how the liberal state came into being. This overview also includes an account of how the modern idea of representative government was born and how it proved to be an integral part of the liberal state. Along with providing this account, a discussion of the very idea of representative government is also presented in Part II. This presentation conceptualizes the idea of representative government as resting upon five distinct political-philosophical presuppositions. This presentation is then followed by an overview of how the liberal state was transformed to a liberal-democratic one, and how, in the new society, the principles of representative government were combined with the principle of universal suffrage to produce a new conception of democracy. This new conception is referred to in this part and the rest of the book as the “liberal-democratic conception of democracy” and is characterized as the idea of “rule by a freely- and popularly-elected representative government.” The last chapter of Part II briefly examines the main assumptions and premises that are often employed both in justificatory arguments for the idea of representative government and in defending this idea against the idea of the direct participation of ordinary people in governing.

The main aim of Part II is to portray the image of the “liberal-democratic conception of democracy” (and its purely representative form of government) as it is viewed from the standpoint of the ideals represented by the original idea of democracy, viz., the idea of the political empowerment of the people. The main force of the analyses, discussions, and historical data provided in this part is directed toward making three main arguments. The first is that, by design, the very idea of representative government in the liberal-democratic conception is an elitist and aristocratic construct; it is a conscious scheme designed to keep citizens at a “safe” distance away from the business of governing. The second is that the history of representative government in the modern world has adequately demonstrated that in its present form, the representative type of government works, as a rule, to the advantage of the wealthy classes (and other moneyed or well-organized interest groups) who manipulate or control the state for their own strategic purposes. These two problems constitute the main democratic shortcomings of the liberal-democratic form of representative government.<sup>6</sup> Finally, the third argument of Part II is that the “liberal-democratic conception of democracy”—(i.e., the idea of “rule by a freely and popularly elected representative government”)—can be characterized as *the idea of the political disempowerment of the people*, and thus as a gross perversion of the original meaning of democracy as the idea of the political empowerment of the people.

Part III presents an overview of some of the criticisms and problems that the liberal-democratic state and the “liberal-democratic conception of democracy” had to fend off and grapple with in the course of the last four decades or so. Some of these criticisms target the representative component of the liberal-democratic state by questioning whether a *purely* representative system of government could truly serve the interests of the people as it claims, and whether the consent of the people is sufficient to meet the criterion of democratic legitimacy. Others argue that the democratic element in the liberal-democratic formula lacks real substance and that the liberal-democratic conception has sacrificed democracy to liberalism, as it has given primacy to choice and rights over equality and popular sovereignty. In addition to discussing the problems of the liberal-democratic state and the “liberal-democratic conception of democracy,” Part III also presents a critical analysis of two alternative theories of democracy that have been developed as responses to the liberal-democratic theory in the last four decades or so—viz., the theories of participatory and deliberative democracy. This analysis shows that these new theories, though they lay bare the weaknesses of the liberal-democratic conception and offer valuable insights into how some of these problems could be remedied, by and large, they fail to overcome the democratic shortcomings of the “liberal-democratic conception” and thus fall short of restoring to democracy the full scope of its ideals.

The Conclusion revisits some of the themes discussed in Parts I-III and further develops some of the arguments presented in these parts. Moreover, the Conclusion provides a brief sketch of how the ideal of citizens’ direct participation can be retrieved, and thus sets the stage for *Democracy as the Political Empowerment of the Citizen: Direct-Deliberative e-Democracy*.

## Notes

1. The word “perversion” here is used in many of its ordinary senses. The eleventh edition of *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* defines perversion as “the action of perverting: the condition of being perverted.” The dictionary defines the verb “pervert” as “1 a: to cause to turn aside or away from what is good or true or morally right: CORRUPT b: to cause to turn aside or away from what is generally done or accepted: MISDIRECT 2 a: to divert to a wrong end or purpose: MISUSE b: to twist the meaning or sense of: MIS-INTERPRET *syn* . . . debase.” Moreover, throughout this work, “perversion” is often used interchangeably with words such as “distortion” and “degeneration,” all of which are taken as tantamount to “betraying” the “original” ideals of democracy and twisting them into something other than what the “original” idea represented.

2. It is this conviction that informs America’s understanding of globalism. In the lexicon of the American ideology of democracy, a country earns the honor of being called a “free nation” or a “democratic country” if it gives free-markets free reign, and allows them to overwhelm the political system and dictate its agenda.

3. The phrase the “essentially contested concept” is borrowed from an important essay by W. B. Gallie, titled “Essentially Contested Concepts” (written in 1956). In the essay, Gallie discusses religion, art, science, social justice, and democracy as examples of “essentially contested concepts.” See Gallie (1968), pp.178-181 for his discussion of democracy. An example of the work that treated democracy as an essentially contested concept is C.B. Macpherson’s *Real World of Democracy* (1965).

4. As Chapter 1 will argue, three ideals constitute the moral substance of the original idea of democracy: the citizens’ direct participation, deliberation, and equality.

5. In present circumstances, marked by high levels of economic productivity, the objective conditions for democracy are much readier than they were in the time of ancient Athens. A main shortcoming of the ancient Athenian democracy was its exclusion from the franchise of the majority of the population (women, resident foreigners, and the slaves). As will be discussed later, this exclusion should, in part, be attributed to the city’s under-productive economy. Without the free labor of slaves who worked in industry (mainly mining), agriculture, and in homes, without the contributions to its economy by resident foreigners, and without the tributes it collected from colonies, the city could not reach the level of the economic prosperity it needed to create the political stability, civility, and cultural-intellectual maturity necessary for establishing and sustaining democracy.

6. The sharp criticisms directed against the idea of representative government in Part II should be interpreted only as the rejection of the liberal-democratic form of the idea, and not as a wholesale rejection of the idea of political representation.